

AN ANIMATED SHORT FILM TITLED *GILL*  
  
A CREATIVE PROJECT  
  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
  
FOR THE DEGREE  
  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
  
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## Statement of the Problem

In the animation industry, especially in Hollywood, films tend to follow established trends and formulas, with only a few exceptions. For example, a good percentage of Hollywood animated features are family friendly comedies or slap-stick narratives that rely heavily on gags. Pixar and Disney have occasionally tackled serious subject matter, an example being Pete Docter's film, *Up*. The first 15 minutes of the film tackle adult themes such as failed pregnancy and death. After the emotional montage, the film goes into familiar territory, with talking animals and comedic situations. *Mary and Max*, directed by Adam Elliot, is an example of an animated feature that explores darker themes like depression and suicide. Such films are a rarity in Hollywood and help expose deeper issues that do not get discussed often.

The biggest challenge of my film is to visually show the audience how a boy with social anxiety disorder feels. There is little to no dialogue at all in the film because I wanted Gill's silence to mirror the visuals. People who have social anxiety tend to experience the world in silence and I wanted to capture that feeling. One of the twelve principles of animation is exaggeration, which is what I will utilize quite a bit for my main character's panic attacks. The principle of exaggeration is important for my goals because it emphasizes Gill's irrational fears in terms we can visually see and understand.

The other eleven principles of animation are the following: arcs, anticipation, slow-in and slow-out, squash and stretch, pose to pose versus straight ahead, follow through and overlapping action, timing, solid drawing, appeal, staging, and secondary action. Arcs are the motion paths that organic matter takes, as opposed to the linear motion paths that machines make.

Anticipation is an action that occurs before the main action. An example of anticipation can be

seen when a pitcher brings back his arm before throwing a curve ball. Slow-in and slow out is the principle that highlights how objects start and stop an action. In reality, objects never come to a complete or sudden stop. Instead, organic and inorganic objects tend to slowly ease into their terminal positions. Follow through and overlapping action further enhances this principle, since it describes how objects do not stop all at once. When a pitcher follows through with his action, for example, his arm's movement is followed by the movements of his shirt and torso in varying order. The principle of timing is simply how an animation is timed in the context of a film. Squash and stretch is one of the most important principles of animation because it describes how a character must change shape in order for there to be dynamic action. An example of squash and stretch can be illustrated by how a bouncing ball "squashes" when hitting the ground and extends after it leaves the ground, all while maintaining the same volume. Pose to pose versus straight ahead happens during the planning stage of animation, along with timing. Pose to pose is the process of planning every main pose of a character, or key pose, throughout the duration of a scene and subsequently animating drawings in between each key pose. Straight ahead is the process of animating a scene without key poses. Appeal is perhaps the most elusive principle because it deals with how charismatic and entertaining a character is, as well as the character's pose. Staging deals with how a character is cinematically framed and situated against a background space. Solid drawing refers to the act of creating drawings that are accurate and have a sense of volume and weight. The last principle of secondary action and can be described as the action that coincides with the main action. An example of this can be demonstrated with a man walking and snapping his fingers. The main action features the man walking, while the secondary action is the person snapping his fingers.

I use 2D animation to move my characters and utilize a mixture of 3D and 2D methods to construct my background paintings. Toon Boom Harmony is the software I use for animation and Photoshop and Autodesk Maya are the 2D and 3D software that are being used respectively to create the backgrounds. I divided my film into a traditional three act story structure, which includes a beginning, middle and end. According to Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*, the traditional three act story structure represents the hero's journey, which is defined as the trials that a hero or protagonist must overcome in order to reach his or her goal. The first act introduces the main character and his or her "call to action". The call to action happens when the main character is brought into a conflict or journey and must decide to answer the call or reject the journey. Once the hero embarks on the journey, he or she must separate from the "ordinary world", which is their home, and face a series of tests and trials from a series of gatekeepers and enemies. The second act is generally the longest part of the story and involves the hero in the biggest conflict that results in a climax before the third act. The third act focuses on the character overcoming all obstacles and reaching a resolution.

The first act in my story introduces the audience to Gill and establishes what his interests are, as well as his temperament. This lays the groundwork for the inciting incident, which shows Gill embarrassing himself in front of his peers and having an anxiety attack. This event triggers his social anxiety and introduces the main theme of my story. The second act shows Gill struggling in his new world, avoiding social situations and experiencing his worst social fears. This act also introduces us to Gill's mentor, his school counselor, who tries to give Gills the tools to cope with his social phobia. Cognitive behavioral techniques are used to bring Gill out of his metaphorical shell. After some resistance, Gill starts to get better, and is able to approach and talk to other kids in a group therapy session. I include reversals and twists so that the audience has a sense of

uncertainty on whether or not Gill will succeed in his efforts. This leads to the third act, which shows Gill facing his fears and coming to terms with his anxiety. He does not fully recover, but does take the first steps toward getting better through exposure therapy and the guidance of the school counselor. I want to give the audience a sense of closure, but at the same time, give a realistic end to my story. People rarely fully recover from social anxiety right away. Rather, people with social phobia are able to cope and gradually get better over time.

My film differs from other shorts that tackle similar themes by pushing the story's arc of recovery more than just a spontaneous recovery for my protagonist. Other shorts that tackle similar themes of anxiety and depression do not always address the recovery process, as well as the insertion of a mentor figure to point the protagonist in the right direction. For example, the short *In Between* shows social anxiety manifest itself in the form of an alligator following a woman around. The alligator acts as both a shield against the world, as well as a companion. The woman overcomes her anxiety by accepting her condition and facing her fears head on. Another Gobelins short, *Distance*, deals with a girl who likes a boy but is afraid to approach him because of anxiety and fear. Before she approaches the object of her affections, psychedelic visuals manifest themselves in the form of her anxieties before everything turns to normal. In my short, I want to show Gill getting help from others before getting better. I was inspired by the fact that other shorts had the courage to address the issue of anxiety in some way, but I want to show a more gradual change and growth for Gill, with the help from a mentor figure.

The realism I wish to inject into my own film is the representation of Gill's victories versus his losses, as well as his meeting of a counselor, who tries to help him come to terms with his anxiety. Another unique feature of my film is the way I utilize distorted visuals and sound to show Gill's anxiety attacks. For example, the sound of an aggressively pounding heart is a

sound cue for Gill's impending anxiety attack, as well as a real symptom of the disorder. When Gill experiences a panic attack, he sees everything around him as distorted; the perspective of the environment changes and stretches and the color palette changes to a more aggressive red color to signal his fight or flight response to danger.

Through this project, I will be helping diversify the stories that are told in animation. There is a misconception that animation should always be comedic or just for children. Social anxiety is an issue that affects people of all ages and my film is aimed at audiences ranging from twelve and up; adults with social anxiety who watch my film will recognize a bit of themselves in Gill. Since social anxiety often manifests itself during the formative years of one's life, I want to bring awareness to social phobia and hopefully give courage to those who are discouraged from seeking help. Although there is sadness in my story, the narrative is ultimately optimistic.

### **Review of Artistic Influences**

As a filmmaker and animator, I draw my influences from both nineteenth century western painters and production painters from the Golden Age of Disney. Japanese ukiyo-e woodcuts from the nineteenth century have also found their way into my work in terms of how I like to simplify compositions. Ukiyo-e woodcuts were woodblock prints created by Japanese artists during the nineteenth century that depicted ordinary life in Japan. The prints' clean designs and vibrant use of colors influenced both the design philosophy and sense of solid color that I use in my backgrounds. Production painters such as Mary Blair and Eyvind Earle have also influenced how I approach my background art. Their compositions utilize geometric shapes and a mixture of pastel and intense colors to draw the viewer's eye, and I also seek to simplify backgrounds so

that the viewer can be drawn to the characters on the stage. The Hudson River School has been influential because of their sense of light and atmosphere. In my work, I always want to create a particular mood and atmosphere, as well as time of day, which gives a sense of believability that my audience can buy into. I want audiences to believe that my worlds exist so that my stories can take center stage.

The cinematic style of films such as *Distance* and *In Between* both visually demonstrated how someone with anxiety might feel like, which was very influential to how I approached Gill's perception of the world. Using strong colors and geometric designs, the visuals in *Distance* displayed anxiety in a very lucid and exaggerated way. *In Between* had more pastel colors and included a protagonist who reacted to her anxiety, which manifested himself in the form of an alligator, in such a way that the audience can visualize how she is feeling. Other films such as *Odyssey 2001* and *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, influenced how I approached camera moves and timing. Both films had very slow camera pans and tracking shots that reflected the psychological tension present in a particular moment. In *The Shining*, for example, Jack's son Danny is seen riding his toy bicycle through a hallway while a steadicam shot follows him. He eventually meets two girls at the end of the hallway and the audience is able to see that something ominous will happen. I sought to capture a similar feeling in my film, in terms of building up a sense of anxiety in the audience.

### **Review of Influences/Literature**

Research for my short film included a combination of texts covering the topic of social anxiety disorder and animation. In order to create a believable world for *Gill*, I had to find out what social phobia was, what the treatment options were, and how the condition manifests itself in

individuals. The texts that were used to research social anxiety disorder were the following: *Shy Children, Phobic Adults, From Social Anxiety to Social Phobia, Multiple Perspectives, Social Anxiety, Social Phobia*, and *International Handbook of Phobic and Anxiety Disorder in Children and Adolescents*.

*Shy Children, Phobic Adults*, by Deborah C. Beidel and Samuel M. Turner, discusses various methods of treatment for social anxiety disorder. Cognitive-behavioral strategies are discussed and compared, regarding their effectiveness in treating social anxiety. One example of a cognitive-behavioral strategy is exposure therapy, which requires the patient to replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts. Patients must analyze what triggers their feelings of anxiety as well as their perception of circumstances.

Another textbook that explores effective treatments for social phobia, as well as potential causes of the mental illness is *From Social Anxiety to Social Phobia, Multiple Perspectives*. Concepts such as the idea of embarrassment and responses to humiliation help the reader understand what may be a central cause to social phobia. Another concept that is explored is perfectionism, which postulates that individuals who want to be perfect are very self-conscious about what other people think of them.

*Social Anxiety*, by Leary Kowalski, explores the concepts of self-presentational motivation and impression monitoring, which concepts that are explored in this text. The idea that people have varying levels of how they manage and try to control how they are seen by others is important to understanding self-consciousness. Leary proposes that there is a relative relationship between how much people self-monitor their thoughts and presentation to others versus their level of social anxiety.



*Social Phobia*, by John Marshall, explores the daily experiences of people who suffer from social anxiety disorder. Individual experiences are diverse but have overlapping similarities, especially the fear of how others perceive them. By recalling stories from his patients, Marshall is able to gain insight into what it feels like to have social phobia.

*International Handbook of Phobic and Anxiety Disorder in Children and Adolescents*, by Thomas H. Ollendick, Neville J. King and William Yule, is a text that explores the symptoms of social anxiety disorder among children. An important aspect of the literature describes the difference between the term “shyness” and “social anxiety”. The difference between the two terms highlights the misunderstanding that our culture has about social phobia.

Research revolving around animation has helped reinforce the technical principles and industry methods used to execute the vision of *Gill*. The following texts helped inspire and bring structure to my storytelling and animation: *Inspired 3D Short Film Production*, *The Illusion of Life*, *Directing the Story: Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques for Live Action and Animation*, *Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Doesn't Exist*, *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*, and *The Writer's Journey*.

Various methods used in the process of creating an animated short film are covered in *Inspired 3D Short Film Production*, by Jeremy Cantor. Pipeline techniques such as character design iteration, research, and animation are explained, as well as what mistakes to avoid. Another helpful aspect of the text is the mention of time management and how to allocate resources throughout the duration of a project.

*The Illusion of Life* goes beyond studio techniques for creating an animated film and describes the twelve principles of animation that were pioneered during Walt Disney's Golden Era. These

animation principles are guidelines that animators must follow in order to create the “illusion of life”, or believable motion that makes the audience believe that a character is alive. Historical events about the Disney studio are mentioned, giving further insight into the development of Walt Disney’s Animation Department during the Golden Age of Disney. This text has influenced generations of animators since its inception into the industry in 1981.

Francis Glebas’s *Directing the Story: Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques for Live Action and Animation* describes the storyboarding process that occurs before animation. The act of storytelling using storyboards is thoroughly explained in the context of animation and live-action filmmaking. Storyboarding is the act of creating sequential drawings that describe and articulate the context, action and timing of a story. Creating beat boards happens before the storyboarding stage and consolidates the most important story points in as few drawings as possible.

Aside from storyboarding, conceiving fantastical worlds form of illustrations is crucial when forming a story. James Gurney wrote *Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Doesn’t Exist* as an instructional manual on how to create illustrations and engage in the process of “world-building”. Gurney emphasizes the importance of gathering, as well as creating reference before executing the final illustration. The thorough preparatory process of the Old Masters and Golden Age Illustrators has had immense an influence on how Gurney prepares his paintings. In addition to describing the process of sketching, Gurney also goes into great depth about the construction of maquettes.

In the texts *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need* and *The Writer’s Journey*, movie genres and story archetypes are discussed at length. *Save the Cat!* covers certain

story genres that movies generally fall into. The author, Blake Snyder, creates categories such as Buddy Love, Golden Fleece, and Monster in the House, describing how certain movies fall under them and why. Snyder describes story arcs, as well as what kinds of characters populate each kind of story. Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* is heavily inspired by Joseph Campbell's work, *The Hero's Journey*. Vogler goes beyond his influences and explains how story archetypes apply to modern storytelling, particularly films. *The Writer's Journey* has been used as reference by screenwriters and movie executives when it comes to troubleshooting story problems. Although there is no set formula for effective storytelling, Vogler, like Campbell, finds commonality in the way all cultures tell stories and breaks down structure.

### **Creation Process**

Pre-production, which is the first stage of creation and design for animated films, began with storyboards and the visual look. Storyboard and beat board passes can be seen in Figure 13. During the storyboarding stage, story issues were fixed and screened against multiple audiences to make sure that the message of the film was reading or understood. This stage is perhaps the most important part of the whole production because if the story is not good enough in rough visual form, polished visuals will not help sell the idea.

Figure 1



In terms of visual development, there were quite a few iterations of background art, as well as the main characters against the backgrounds. Shown in Figure 1 is concept art that serves as a proof of concept or visual reference for the final render, and Figure 10 shows the final image as shown in the film. The proof of concept is a way to show the director how the final look may turn out, as well as help with the layout of the characters against the background. Figure 5 displays a cut-out view of the main character's classroom, and also serves as concept art. The final iteration shown in the film of the classroom can be seen in Figure 11.

Figure 5



Production consisted of animating the characters digitally in the software, Toon Boom Harmony. With the software, the character was hand-drawn frame by frame and colored. Backgrounds were painted in Photoshop and the character was placed against the background during post-production in After Effects. Figure 12 shows a fully colored and animated character against a background.

Figure 7



Figure 10

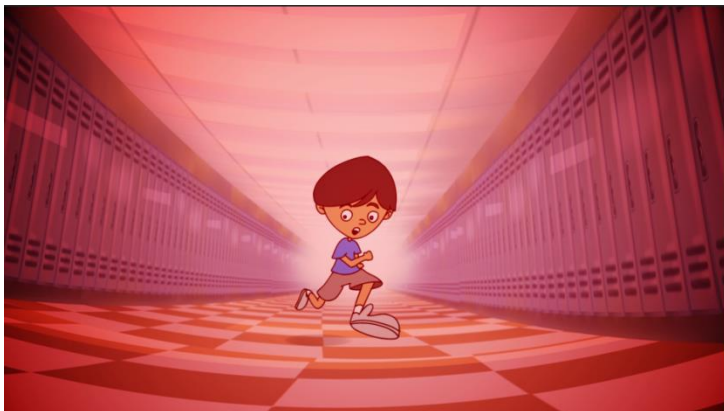


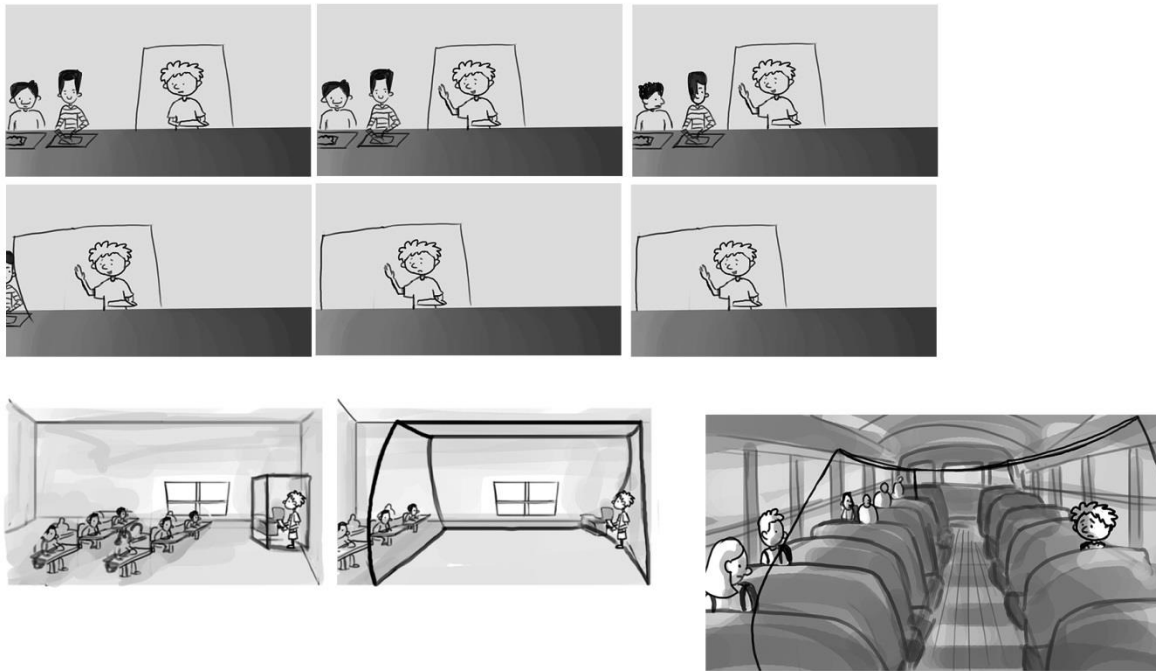
Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



### **Descriptions and Images of the Artworks**

Figure 1: The protagonist, Gill, running through the school hallway during one of his anxiety attacks.

Figure 2: Outside of Gill's home, which is a contrast in mood to what he is feeling inside. The next shot cuts to a gloomy shot in his room where he is hiding from the world.

Figure 3: Proof of concept showing Gill terrified of simply going up to the board and writing an answer to an equation.

Figure 4: Visual development image of Gill nervously walking down his school hallway.

Figure 5: This proof of concept showing a cut-out view of the classroom where Gill experiences one of his anxiety attacks.

Figure 6: Still of shows cut-out view of Gill's room.

Figure 7: Early character development during the film's pre-production stage.

Figure 8: Still showing the cut-out view of a school bus.

Figure 9: Early character development work.

Figure 10: Final image of the film showing Gill running through the hallway of his school.

Figure 11: Final image of the film showing Gill's classroom.

Figure 12: Colored animated image against a background.

Figure 1



Figure 2





Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

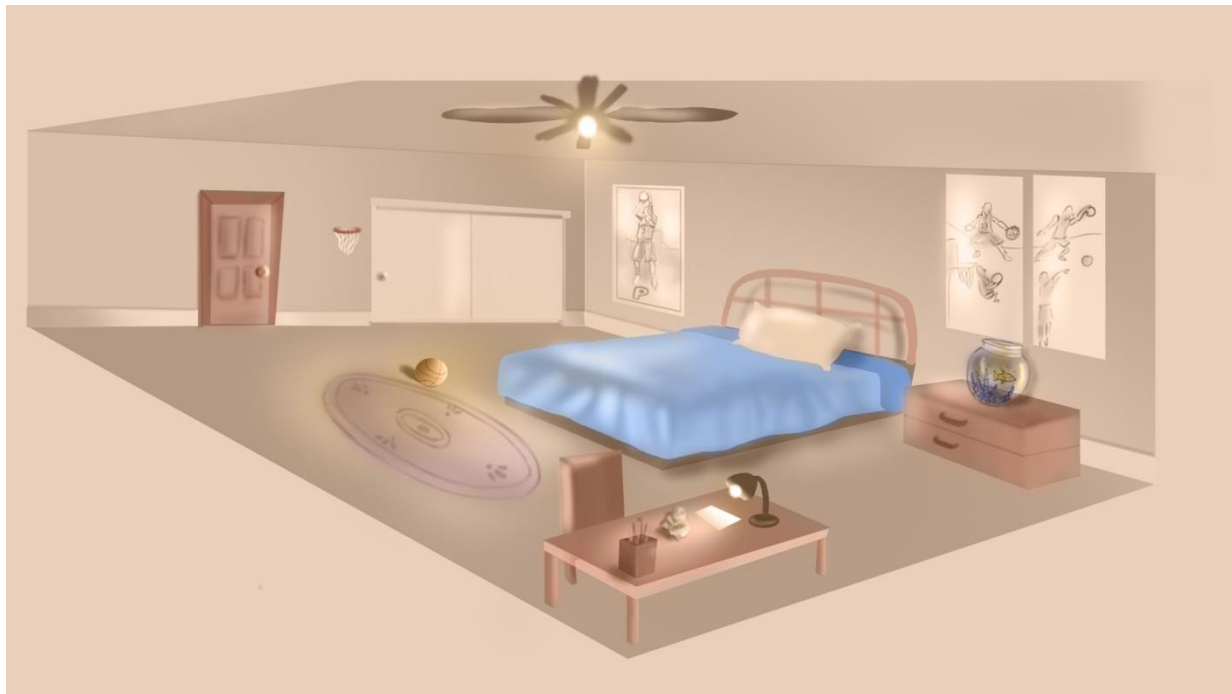


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

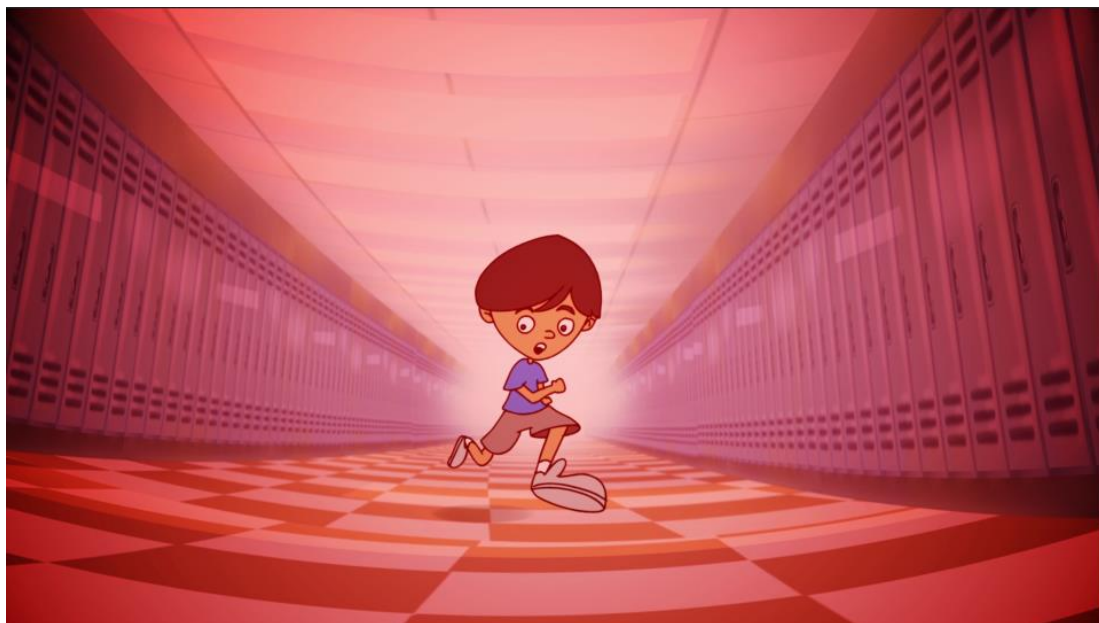




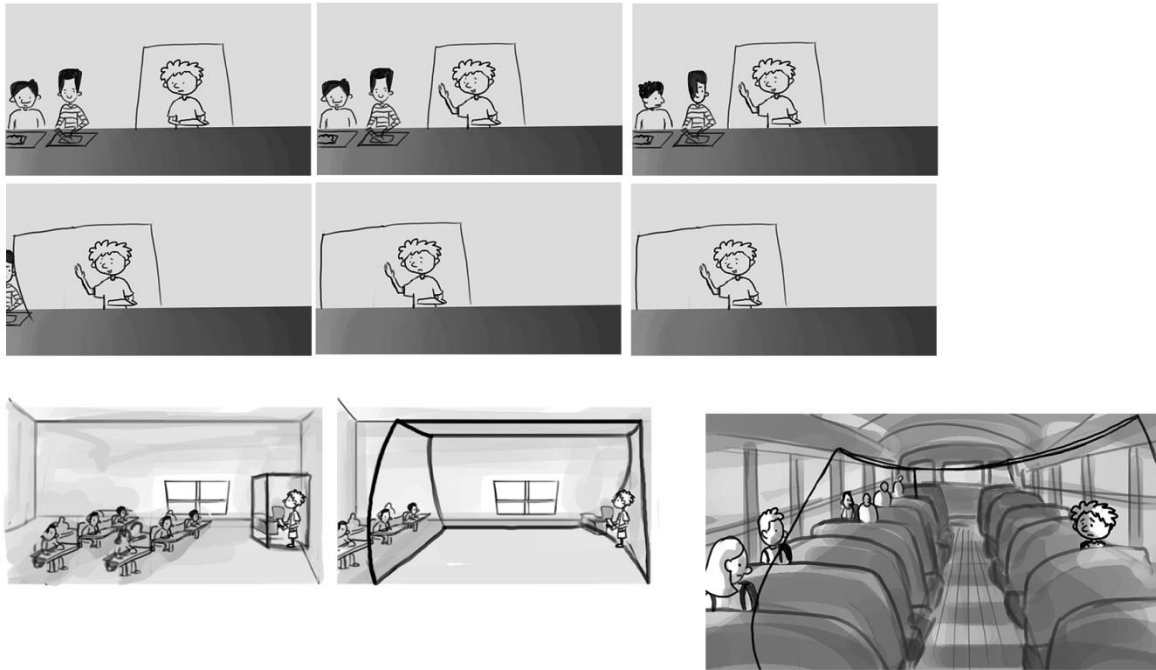
Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



## Conclusion

In order to push storytelling forward, there must be more diversity in the narratives told on the big screen. In the animation industry, creating short films is becoming a way for independent filmmakers to break into the industry without having to be involved with any major studio in Hollywood. Both the Internet and the festival circuit are great avenues for films to generate attention and spread a message that has not been already introduced into the cultural zeitgeist. With *Gill*, I show a unique point a view of the world that is experienced through my main character's eyes. The visual exaggeration of Gill's most fearful moments is what makes seemingly ordinary moments compelling. One of the reasons our culture perceives animation to be strictly for children is because most stories being told with this medium are either family friendly comedies or slap-stick entertainment. I want to help add to a more balanced animation

industry where there are a wide variety of stories being told, ranging from happy to sad. Even though there is sadness in Gill's narrative, his story is ultimately optimistic because he eventually comes to terms with his inner demons.

### **Exhibition Statement**

The short film, *Gill*, is a four-minute and thirty second animated short dealing with the topic of social anxiety disorder. The protagonist, Gill, wants to connect with others but his social anxiety threatens to jeopardize everything. Themes such as social isolation, friendship, and recovery are all highlighted in the film. The arc of this story outlines Gill's journey from being afraid of others, to the point of having panic attacks, to taking that first step towards connecting with the world around him. The objective of this short is not to show how one completely recovers from social anxiety. Rather, it shows the reality of how someone comes to terms with the disorder and tries to engage the world on their terms.

*Gill* is animated in 2D, using the software ToonBoom Harmony. This technique is traditional in nature, in the sense that every image is drawn by hand. However, the drawings are done directly onto a Cintiq screen and computer. Background environments are painted in Photoshop. Once the production is finished, compositing happens in Adobe After Effects, where image sequences of animation are compiled and layered on top of the painted environments. After this compositing stage, final color correction happens in which each scene of the film is finessed towards its final look. The final stage of post-production is the editing process which happens in Premiere Pro. This is where music, sound, and visuals are combined together and rendered into a movie.

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